

To: CN=Alexis Strauss/OU=R9/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA;CN=Laura Yoshii/OU=R9/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA[]; N=Laura Yoshii/OU=R9/O=USEPA/C=US@EPA[]
Cc: []
From: CN=Karen Schwinn/OU=R9/O=USEPA/C=US
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Hotspot

here's some insight into Charlie Hoppin's perspective, as we talk further about the status of WQS in the Delta.

Water crisis on collision course
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By Harry Cline
Editorial

California's water crisis may be on a collision course with the state's ongoing fiscal predicament. If solutions to the water crisis can be hammered out, the state's continuing budget crisis and revenue shortfalls may jeopardize issuance of state bonds to pay for construction projects. This is a new frustration for Northern California farmer Charlie Hoppin, who left his family farm to become the first farmer on the California State Water Resources Control Board three years ago. Last April he was appointed board chairman by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"I am not sure California has the ability to bond itself to fix the Delta and other infrastructure improvement," Hoppin told those at the Western Plant Health Association Regulatory Issues Conference in Sacramento.

Hoppin's son is managing the family's 3,200 acre farm in Sutter and Yolo counties while Hoppin is in Sacramento. The family farms rice, fresh market melons, walnuts, small grains, and oilseed crops.

As a farmer, Hoppin calls himself the "regulated" element of the board and as such admits to bringing a different perspective to the agency on water and environmental issues. "My idea of what is right and fair is sometimes different from what (others in the agency) think is right and fair. Fortunately, I am chairman of the board and they work for me. It is working out."

As a lifelong farmer who meets daily challenges with decisions, Hoppin admits to growing frustration over the lack of movement on both the state and federal levels to solve the water crisis.

The Legislature continues to try to juggle a half dozen pieces of legislation in an attempt to come up with a solutions package to send to the governor to alleviate the state's water crisis.

As negotiations reached the 11th hour, Hoppin says he was not optimistic in late August that an acceptable package will be sent to the governor.

"It is pretty clear that the state senate and assembly will not pass a reasonable package the governor will sign. The governor is committed to infrastructure improvements and that includes new dams," Hoppin said. Dams and surface storage are not likely to be part of the package.

Legislation to improve water movement through the Delta will no doubt be part of the package. However, Hoppin says what he has seen so far has not been "reasonable" including the appointment of a Delta water master.

As a farmer, Hoppin understands that a water master is in most cases "very valuable" to the day-to-day operations of a water system. However, some of the legislative proposals he has seen for a Delta water master give one man the power equal to the Dalai Lama and God to control the Delta and usurp the power of the State Water Control Board.

The governor will not sign legislation giving anyone that kind of power, Hoppin said.

Hoppin believes the state's water crisis has become entangled in partisan state politics. He anticipates a bill to be passed by the state Legislature that the governor will not sign. However, legislators want that, believes Hoppin, so they can tell Californians they passed Delta fix legislation, but the lame duck governor would not sign it.

"It is becoming clear to me the Legislature is not going to pass reasonable legislation the governor will sign," he surmised.

However, any Delta fix legislation gets legislators off the water crisis hook for now as they await the next governor, who they believe will be more responsive to how the Democratic controlled Legislature wants to solve the state water crisis than the current governor.

Improving Delta conveyance is a major short time fix, but if a package was approved today, it would be 10 to 12 years before any additional water could flow south of the Delta, according to Hoppin.

In the meantime, the fate of San Joaquin Valley agriculture is in jeopardy. He calls that a "true injustice" and pledged that he will work tirelessly until his term expires next year to make the Delta a more efficient conveyance system to move more water south.

"I don't care if we fix the Delta by moving water more efficiently through the Delta or around the Delta. It is not very efficient now," he says.

Northern California, where Hoppin farms, has an adequate water supply. He said the addition of off-stream storage to gather water for movement south through the Delta would greatly improve water supplies to the San Joaquin Valley.

Hoppin says it will take a comprehensive package to meet California's long term water needs, including groundwater recycling and recharge, new dams, improving conveyance through the Delta and other infrastructure improvements.

Hoppin's frustration reaches the federal level and the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The State Water Board must manage Delta waters to meet ESA requirements, which he believes are unreasonable.

Much of it has surrounded the Delta smelt, which he calls a "very vulnerable" species. He believes the smelt and other endangered or threatened Delta fish can be better managed as a total species package rather than individual fish.

Hoppin and other state leaders, including the governor, have captured the federal government's attention.

Unfortunately, Hoppin says the feds have not responded to California's concerns with how the ESA is managed.

"When Earl Williams tells the federal government of the legitimate demise and suffering of San Joaquin Valley agriculture because of ESA, no reasonable person can dispute what he has to say," said Hoppin.

Williams is president of the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Associations. Cotton has been the crop that has been hit the hardest by the decline in available federal water related to environmental restraints on irrigation water deliveries.

Unfortunately, the federal government seems to view the water crisis Williams relates as akin to a hailstorm in Montana or a hurricane in Louisiana.

"They are used to focusing on a disaster being a one-year thing where they can throw some resources at it and it will go away," Hoppin says.

The San Joaquin Valley's water crisis will not disappear as long as the restraints of ESA are on water storage in California, according to Hoppin. "There seems to be no willingness on the federal level to modify ESA."

Williams was on the program talking about water availability and the impact of ESA on the state's cotton industry.

When surface water was delivered to the West Side of the San Joaquin Valley in the late 1960s, that began a period of prosperity for the cotton industry that saw California cotton acreage peak at almost 1.6 million acres in 1980. Acreage has been on a gradual decline since. Part of that has been crop diversification, including the planting of more permanent crops on land developed with row crops like cotton.

The decline in cotton acreage was hastened starting in 1992 with the Central Valley Improvement Act which took away 25 percent of the water supply from the West Side. ESA restrictions of pumping along with CVIP reduced the water supply by 35 percent from 1992 to 2007. Since then, more losses have come from droughts and more endangered species rulings.

The SJV cotton acreage has plummeted to less than 200,000 acres this year. From 2005 until 2009, acreage in the Valley dropped by 72 percent.

While economics have played a role in the cotton acreage decline, it has been water that has had a greater impact. Cotton uses only about 2.5 acre feet of water per year and is an efficient water user compared to trees and vines. However, permanent crops cannot survive without water and farmers have had to divert a dwindling water supply from cotton and other row crops to protect their investments in permanent crops.#

